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MY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AT MY NATIVE HOME.

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MY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

My first impressions respecting the Divine Being were very indefinite. From my earliest remembrance I had heard his name pronounced by my grandfather in the solemnity of prayer on the Sabbath, the only day of the seven in which he offered worship with his family. Then I frequently heard the same name uttered by some one reading aloud from the Bible, or some other religious book, on the sacred day. Thus the idea of God became most intimately associated in my mind with the Sabbath; and this seemed to me a long, very long and cheerless period. I must not only stay in the house, but much of the time sit still and silent in my little chair; restraints, with the promptings of nature within, and the invitations of nature without, render most irksome to active, prattling childhood. The stillness of the house lay like a vast burthen on my spirit. And when this stillness was broken, it was not often for my relief; for I heard but the dismal monotony of some solitary reader, which fastened the oppression still more painfully on my heart. I probably suffered more in this way than most children; for having no fit conveyance to the distant meeting-house, I could not accompany the family to public worship, for the first four years of my life. I was obliged to remain at home,

generally in company with one individual, whose turn it was to keep the house from harm and myself from mischief and danger. Alas! I had no little brother or sister to share and sympathize in the durance. Even an answering look and fellow feeling in another, would have been a welcome alleviation. It was a task to exist through the day. I hardly knew why I was kept within doors and so still. I was told that I must not play, because it was wicked. What this word meant, I was not informed. I do not recollect to have received hitherto any particular instructions concerning God, excepting perhaps, that he made me, and every body and all things. I had moreover the impression that the Sabbath had some peculiar connexion with this Being, and that he was the occasion of this pause in the ordinary pursuits of people, and of my wearisome restraint. Of course, my ideas of God, though very vague, were as unpleasant as my cheerless Sabbath associations could make them.

At length these indefinite notions were changed to a terrific distinctness, to conceptions which filled my mind with unmingled dread. I think that I was between four and five years of age, when a youth of eighteen, living with my father, undertook to give me a few hints for my religious edification. He was staying at home with me on the Sabbath, but was hardly so strict a keeper as my affectionate relatives. I wandered about the house to escape from time and solitude; but the echoes of my pattering footsteps and the creaking of doors, gave me an awful sense of lonesomeness, and I fled to an unfinished upper chamber, and crept upon a bed, where lay the aforementioned youth, enjoying that lazy luxury vouchsafed to the laborious on the day of rest. What prompt-

ed him I know not, for his character was rather the opposite of pious — perhaps as a penance, he might have been reading the Scriptures, or something else which made him feel particularly serious — however it might be, he then gave me a lesson which haunted my soul with horror for years; and it will be an everlasting remembrance to my mind. I recollect nothing of his communications, but the following appalling intelligence. He told me that if I did wrong, if I was wicked, God would put me after death into a place burning with fire and brimstone, called hell, where I should suffer the pain of the flames for ever and ever. I shuddered with emotions I never knew before. I supposed that it was wicked to laugh and play on the Sabbath, and to disobey my parents; and I knew that in these particulars I was very much inclined to wickedness, if not absolutely very guilty; and I was struck with consternation at the thought that I was liable to die at any time, and be plunged into the hell which had been described. The effect was probably greater, on account of my predisposition to gloom. The solitude of the house now seemed pervaded by an all-seeing, but invisible eye, watching my minutest actions. Thenceforth, the Sabbath, and everything of a religious nature seemed doubly dismal. When the idea of God recurred to my mind, he was ever imaged in the character of vengeance.

Not long after I had imbibed the preceding notions, my father presented me, one Sabbath morning, with a copy of the New Testament, enjoining on me to read it every Sabbath. I did as was desired, glad to find something to do, if not positively to enjoy, on the wearisome day. I had read in the Scriptures before, but had not

thought much more of their meaning, than if they had been the untranslated Greek. I had recited the Assembly's Catechism, but a child of course could not understand what is hardly intelligible to the mature. A new book, and that the property of the child, has a new interest to him. And now, moreover, my mind was excited to things contained in the Scriptures, in consequence of the recent information I had received concerning the character of God.

I soon found a terrible delight in the perusal of my Testament; for my curiosity was not long in finding that most wonderful of all the books, the Revelation of John. Its narrative character was alluring, and its supernatural incidents and awfully sublime imagery, fastened my whole soul, as if I had been an immediate spectator of the miraculous scenes.

I looked upon every particular in the description, as the literal truth, to be fulfilled in the future. My conceptions of what I read were exceedingly vivid. Some circumstances in the awful representation seemed almost as distinct to my mind's eye, as if I had seen with the vision of the Evangelist. I saw the sun become black, the moon become as blood, the stars fall to the earth, the heaven departing as a scroll, and the mountains and islands moving out of their places, and the men of the earth calling on the mountains and rocks to fall on, and hide them from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb. I saw the great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books opened, and the dead judged, and those whose names were unrecorded in

the book of life, cast into the lake of fire. And then, when I beheld the new heaven, and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, for the blessed to dwell in, I tremblingly wondered whether my name would be written in the Lamb's book of life. All was to me a most fearful reality.

This extraordinary book had probably more influence on my imagination, than anything else I ever read. It confirmed what had been told me before concerning God; and it filled my mind with new images, which for years afterwards were ever associated with his name.

I found a confirmation of these terrific views in other parts of Scripture, where judgment was predicted and wo was pronounced. Those numerous passages which represent the Creator as a father, all love and tenderness towards his children, scarcely attracted my notice, so impressed were my fears with the awful of his character.

My understanding in divine things was still farther darkened at the house of worship; for I was at length freed from my lonely imprisonment on the Sabbath. It was not however by the pastor that I was misled. His countenance was benignant, his manner mild, and the tones of his voice pleasant. The language of his sermons and prayers, I was then hardly old enough to take an interest in, as no one particularly directed my attention to their import.

If there was ever anything unpleasant in his performances, it was when he spoke on those subjects with which I had the most gloomy associations. His was a religion of light and cheerfulness. The sun of righteousness was never darkened, or the glory of God dimmed and dishonored by his teaching. My heart would now have me pen an eulogium, but propriety forbids.

It was from Watts's psalms and hymns, that my early church edification was chiefly derived. I found a pleasure in reading at random, on the two open pages, during the singing of the selected portion. The measurement of the verse and the music of the rhyme had a charm for me. And here my imagination experienced that seducing though terrible excitement, which it found in the descriptions of the sacred volume. The phraseology of Scripture took hold of my mind with a more horrific grasp, when appropriated by the genius of the modern bard, and wrought into easily remembered verse.

From the time that I began to peruse the Scriptures more generally and attentively, and to be acquainted with the above-mentioned psalms and hymns, I entertained a most painful fear of God in the mightier and more striking operations of nature. 'His pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the highest gave his voice; hail-stones and coals of fire. Yea, he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings and discomfited them. He made the clouds his chariot, he walked on the wings of the wind. God thundered marvellously with his voice. His lightnings enlightened the world; the earth saw and trembled. The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.'

Passages like these had a great effect upon my mind, so that the Creator seemed to make use of nature, only to clothe himself with awful majesty, or to execute the purposes of his wrath. The summer, notwithstanding all its teeming delights, was a formidable season to me. Even in the cold opposite winter, I used to anticipate its

alarms. How anxiously did I study the face of the forenoon sky, to divine whether there would be a thunder-shower before night. Most vividly do I recollect the varying aspects of those summer days, and my varying feelings also, as the unfavorable omens gathered or dispersed, or became fulfilled in the dreaded shower. When the light-edged, dark-bodied clouds began to roll into each other in the western sky, and to lift their bold craggy fronts in closer contiguity, then would my pulse begin to beat quick and heavy, and my frame to quake. But when their towering masses began to lose their individuality in one dark blue expanse, and the ear to catch the far off thunder-roll, and the lightning to crinkle along the portentous obscurity, then would my limbs relax and my strength fail. Oh, how have I been almost paralyzed with terror, when the whole heaven has become arched with the black vapor, and the lightning has darted athwart my vision, seemingly in contact with the very eye-ball, and I have felt like a shattered thing in the immediate thunder-crash.

Well might it be terrific, for it seemed the presence and the power of that awful God, ready perhaps to strike my body to death, and snatch my soul to judgment. When the storm was past, and the terror gone, I felt no divine presence in nature's freshened beauty and invigorated life.

Death was to me not only the king of earthly terrors, but it was also a tyrant terror, the idea of it so pursued and possessed my mind, and kept it in the trembling bondage of fear. As long as I might live, I should, indeed, escape that dreadful punishment of the burning lake, of which I had heard. But beyond the grave, all was dark

uncertainty, and I was as likely as any, to be plunged forever into the agonizing flames. O that life, were in duration, as in the days before the flood! The most wretched continuance on earth seemed preferable to an entrance on the world unknown, although there might be a possibility and a hope of heaven. Peculiar circumstances, doubtless, presented the subject with a more appalling aspect to my view.

I lived in the country, where a death makes a more solemn and lasting impression upon the living. The event is more striking, as being less frequent in a scattered population, and more deeply affecting, as the deceased is generally known throughout the town. His departure excites a prevailing seriousness, and a mournful sympathy with the bereaved relations. There is with many of the people a sort of religious pause in their ordinary pursuits, while they attend the solemnity of interment. At the funeral, death seems to be arrayed and surrounded with the insignia and the pomp of his terrific dominion. Here are the sable, the sighs, and the tears of the mourning. Here the trembling prayer is put up to Him who gave, and who hath taken away; who hath clouds and darkness round about him, and righteousness and judgment for the habitation of his throne. Now, the mourners pass along in procession, to take the last look of the dear remains. And then, the sympathizing multitude press around to pay their parting regards. With what shrinking awe did I likewise approach the black enclosure of the dead. The spectacle was fearful. It was the certain evidence that man's body is but dust, and I turned away, dismally realizing that I, too, must die. There lay the familiar form of the well known neighbor.

A little while ago, and I saw him living, active, and happy; now what a change! That awful coffin and the ghastly countenance within, used to haunt my remembrance for months, and in some instances for years. At night on retiring to rest alone, I used to smother myself in the bed-clothes, to hide my eyes from the funereal visions with which my imagination peopled the darkness. Knowing that I was born to die, I used to suffer under the clinging apprehension that I might be cut down in early life, as one or two young acquaintances, and tens of thousands had been. Judgment and eternity were beyond the grave, and was I prepared for them? No; I had not religion, and this I must have or be eternally miserable. I understood by religion, the renouncing of gay amusements, a solemn gravity of demeanor, the making of prayers and joining the church.

How often have I wished that I knew just how long I should live, that I might postpone the gloomy work till the last years or even days of my life. I had the idea that a death-bed repentance would save me. But, alas! the uncertainty of the future was alarming. Still, how could I renounce the joysomeness and the frolic of my boyhood? And then, my young acquaintances, must I separate myself from them, when at school? must I never visit them at their homes, lest I might not maintain the due solemnity of a religious deportment? I could not make these sacrifices. I tremblingly preferred to hazard my soul by living as I had done. I might continue to old age, and then have time enough to prepare for eternity. Or sickness might give me ample warning of the mortal event, so that I could repent and be saved. Sudden death was only one chance out of a thousand; I was willing to risk

this chance, although it was with an abiding anxiety. One thing however I did, which I supposed might be accounted a merit, and serve, in some measure, to secure the favor of heaven. I prayed. On retiring to rest I at first repeated the Lord's prayer. At length I used language of my own. A form was gradually arranged in my mind, from the constant recurrence of the same ideas in my devotions. And often in the day-time, when particularly affected by my meditations, I would steal away to some retirement and make my prayer to God. But the sole cause of my seeming piety, was a slavish fear, an abject shrinking spirit. I used also to read the Bible. This exercise I supposed to have some virtue and saving efficacy in it. I resolved to read the large volume through, from the first word to the last; and this I accomplished. How many times have I reperused chapters of hard names, and to me unintelligible matter, from not being absolutely certain whether I had read them before in my course. When my task was completed, scarcely a deeper impression remained, in respect to very much of the sacred volume, than if I had turned over the leaves with my eyes shut.

There was at one time an unusual religious excitement in the town where I lived. Conferences were held, and some individuals who had hitherto been of dubious reputation, were convinced of their evil ways, and became pious and prayerful. These regenerate ones exhorted their fellow mortals to a like repentance. I attended some of these meetings. And when I beheld the once free-thinking and profane scoffer earnestly exhorting, and quoting Scripture with surprising fluency, and this, with a look and tone which made my blood run cold; when I

also beheld the tearful eyes, and woful countenances, and heard the heavy sighs of many of the audience, my heart throbbed strangely, and my eyes filled, and I felt, as I thought, symptoms of that conversion, of which I had heard so much said. But the work with me ended in these slight symptoms, and it went not much farther with most others. Our prudent pastor was averse to these extraordinary excitements. He attended conferences, because some of his people would have them, and he must watch his startled flock, lest they should scatter to the sectarian folds in the vicinity. He explained the perplexing scripture, and spoke forth the words of truth and soberness in his mild, persuasive tones. The good man had the religion of Jesus sincerely at heart, but in imitation of the Apostle he would show his people 'a more excellent way.' He inculcated that charity without which all pretended gifts of the spirit are nothing.

Thus the revival, as it was beginning to be called, soon died away; and I escaped a conversion, and a zeal without knowledge, which, perhaps, would have effectually hindered my mind from that calm and simple and beautiful Christianity, in which I now have faith, hope, charity and joy.

I have reflected much on the feelings I entertained at this time, and on the causes which led to them. I have watched the operation of other minds, when under religious excitement. From these reflections and observations, I think that I pretty well understand the nature of revivals. A digression on the subject may not be found useless, at least, to those who are just beginning to judge for themselves what is right. The majority of those educated in the christian faith, have received impressions respecting God and religion, similar to those of my early

years. They have read in the Scriptures before they were able to interpret them aright. They have read of the awful power and the burning vengeance of God. They have dwelt upon the dreadful scenes in the Revelation, and have trembled at the final judgments from the great book of account. Their religious reading and instruction in general, are such as to fasten in their minds the most terrific images. In short, they possess in a greater or less degree, associations similar to those which darkened my own mind, as has been related. These associations arise in the mind whenever God, or religion, is thought on, and cast a shadow and a chill over the spirits.

Now the secret of the revival, I conceive to be this. These associations or remembrances are powerfully excited, are brought before the mind's eye with a renewed and startling vividness.

A preacher addresses an audience on the subject of religion. He portrays their sinfulness in the darkest colors, and the consequent wrath of an offended God. The torments of hell are set forth, the danger of delay is urged, and all in that peculiarly dolorous tone, which has become an established characteristic of religious fanaticism and superstitious fear.

No sooner are these topics thus touched upon, than a host of awful images start up in the minds of the hearers. The preacher generally presents them directly himself. To their kindled imaginations, the last trump now sounds, the end of the world is come, the dead are raised and assembled before the terrible glory of the Infinitely Just. The guilty are condemned, and cast into the burning lake. But I need not further describe; the reader has only to consult his own memory, or cast his eye upon hundreds of religious publications within his

reach, and he will have the picture, as true, and as terrible as I can make it.

At these conceptions, the audience are stricken with dismay. They have not reasoned much on religious subjects, and all this material imagery, this figurative representation of the Deity and his judgments, has the same effect as if it were literally true. Perhaps the subject may be illustrated by something of a similar nature. Many persons have their memories stocked with frightful stories about ghosts and other strange sights. Now let these be repeated at night, and how will they close round the fireside, and cast fearful glances behind. In this state, it requires but some little uncommon sound to produce pale consternation. Even the intelligent and the philosophic experience something like the same effect, in reading tales of horror. It is imagination that produces the terror. It presents the images of the objects described to view. The ghost or the assassin seems to be lurking in the very vicinity of the hearers or readers; and they almost expect to see strange shapes on looking round. Just so it is with the subjects of revivals.

Imagination presents the images of the things described, with a distinctness almost like that with which realities stand before the material eye. The omniscient Judge seems present, on the throne of his glory, pronouncing the irrevocable doom; and the terrific agents and instruments of his will, seem to appear also, ready to execute the endless tortures that may be adjudged. These ideal forms, when once conjured up from the repose of memory, are, in the time of the excitement, abidingly present to the mental sight. They are still more horrible in sleep; for now, reason has no control. What the wretched beings simply feared, when awake, they seem actually to experience in their dreams. The

visions of the night are as new warnings, and create a tenfold alarm. Oh, what if my dream should be fulfilled, is the agonizing thought. A gentleman once told me, that after having attended a fanatical meeting, he dreamed that he was writhing in the flames of hell, and his own loud, piercing shrieks awaked him from his seemingly real torments.

Besides these figurative representations appearing as real, another powerful aid to revivals, is that sympathy which always prevails in a community during any unusual excitement of feeling. On the subject of religion, there are many peculiar circumstances, which give to this sympathy an almost resistless influence. All classes of society have an interest in the solemn concern. Differences in rank and age and sex, so important in time, are forgotten, in view of those spiritual distinctions, which shall separate one from another, in eternity. Accordingly, when the great body of minds are all furnished with the predisposing notions, sympathy runs, like the electric fluid, through all of one common nature. Hundreds are often closely crowded into one apartment. Each one not only sees, but often feels the tremblings of his neighbors, in contact. Then there is the sigh, and the tear, and perhaps the groan. Each one perceives, in some at least, the moving tokens of the same feelings with which he is beginning to be affected. Thus sympathy, as it were, passes and repasses from one to another, like an invisible spirit, of restless agency, in the wonderful excitement.

Were I not afraid of digressing too long from my own private experience, which I have set out to relate, I might go on to speak of those principles in human nature, by which a hope is obtained, and rapture rises out of despair; and how the convert, thenceforth, either goes on

his pious, peaceful way, rejoicing, or in a little while becomes more desperately wicked than before. But I must pass these things by, for a few more important considerations, and then return to myself.

It is said that the most hardened and godless sinners are smitten, and become as new creatures. No doubt that many times this is the case. These persons have the same associations with all others. They are excited in the same manner, and with double effect, as they feel themselves to be more wicked, and in more danger than others. They feel that if these things are so, for them indeed, it *is* a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And what if they should be snatched immediately to judgment, by sudden death! They are wrought up by imagination and sympathy to the highest possible pitch of terrific excitement. Under these strong impulses, they break the chain of evil habit, and are reformed, to the astonishment of all. But the causes of the change are perfectly natural, as I trust, has been made clear.

Almost all the inhabitants of christian lands have their minds filled with the images and the associations of which I have spoken. But very few of these reason much on religious opinions. The majority receive the figurative representations of Scripture as the literal truth. No wonder that revival preachers produce such tremendous results, with all the poetical machinery of the Scriptures, of religious hymns, of creeds and catechisms, of Milton's Paradise Lost, and of their own invention besides, to wield in their cause. The same preaching would be in vain among the heathen.

As a proof that revivals are produced in the way I have mentioned, I ask the reader to look at the Hindoos of the present time. How little effect has the preaching

of Missionaries, on their minds. They have preached for years, concerning this awful God, and his infinite punishments of the unbelieving and the wicked, to very small purpose. The fact is, the Hindoos have no associations in their minds, connected with the figurative imagery of Scripture. All is new to them, and foreign to their usual current of thought and feeling. There is no excitement, no sympathy. It is with them as it would be with us, should they send Missionaries here to convert us to their faith. Should any one attempt to excite among the Hindoos a more devout attention to their own religion, and should array before their imaginations, all the terrors on the one hand, and the delights on the other, of their mythology, no doubt he would produce a pagan revival, very like, in many of its features, to the fanatical tumults which have, from time to time, risen and subsided, in many parts of the christian world. Now, if these last are produced by the influence of the holy spirit, as is pretended, it would matter not whether the subjects of this influence were educated in a pagan or a christian faith. Did not the Apostles make multitudes of converts, in many nations of various and deep-rooted religions — even thousands in a day? They were truly assisted by the spirit. But could modern Gentiles more resist this same spirit, than the ancient? Methinks that it must be most evident to the candid, that the wonder-working power of the great conversions, or revivals of modern times, is sympathetic terror, aided more or less, by various other principles in our natures. This will doubtless be denied, and called blasphemy against the holy ghost, by those who have not studied themselves, who have not found the chain of causes and effects which connects their minds with outward and material things. I do not blame them. They really think so. But how can the christian

minister, who has investigated the philosophy of the human mind, who knows what tremendous engines superstition and a common sympathy have been in all ages, how can this educated and enlightened man believe in the supernatural character of revivals?

I have spoken from experience and from observation of the bad effects arising from the figurative representations of the divine punishments. Let it not be supposed, however, from what has been said, that I would disclaim the idea of future retributions for sin. I would have the natural and immutable connexion between vice and misery clearly pointed out. Yet I would have the Creator portrayed not so much the Jehovah of the Old Testament, as the Heavenly Father of the New, whose correcting tenderness should cause his disobedient children to bow their faces with shame and contrition, not hide them with horror and dismay. I would represent Heaven as gently shedding its radiance and its dews on the darkened, petrified heart, to make it fruitful and happy, if it *will* be so, not as preparing lightnings and torrents, to rend asunder, overwhelm and destroy. Let it appear that if we *will* not follow the ceaseless spirit that would lead us, we *must* remain without the kingdom of peace.

There are retributions for sin which result from the constituted nature of matter and mind, and not from the capricious vengeance of this nature's Author and God. These retributions reason finds, conscience feels, and the soul shrinks from. These are terrors of the Lord, which cannot but persuade men, for they are addressed to, and received by the calm understanding; and they cast no shade upon the alluring brightness of the Father's glory.

I trust that it does not appear that I have spoken lightly of the sacred Scriptures. Oh, let it not be supposed that I think lightly of them. My remarks have reference to

erroneous impressions, arising from ignorance of the true character and meaning of these writings. I regard the Bible, properly understood, as an unanswerable proof of One Almighty God, perfect in wisdom and love. When religious teachers shall use its contents aright, skeptics will no longer spurn the volume from their hands, no longer open it only to find and ridicule seeming contradictions. They will bend their powers to the study of its dark and strange places, as patiently and candidly as they would to some yet unstudied, unknown portions in the volume of nature. And they shall rejoice to perceive a divine philosophy in the Word, perfectly harmonious with the admired philosophy of the surrounding creation.

I thought it necessary to detain the reader by these cautionary remarks, because one's meaning is so often misconceived and misrepresented concerning important points in dispute.

I now return to my own religious experience. The personal incidents and feelings thus far detailed, occurred previously to my fifteenth year. By the time that I had arrived at this period, my melancholy superstitions began to pass away from my mind. I had a taste for reading, and as my knowledge of books increased, my solitary thoughts flowed in other courses. Religion presented itself to my mind in a new light. Whenever I recurred to it, which was less frequently than before, it was to reason upon, and to doubt, and finally to deny much that I had believed. There was now no particular religious excitement, and there were no other peculiar circumstances to keep early impressions ever fresh in my mind; so that my growing understanding soon perceived their irrationality.

I occasionally heard the suggestions of the skeptic. His queries, which the bigoted could not answer, and his merriment at believed absurdities did not cause me to re-

nounce the christian faith, but it had a tendency to banish the subject of religion from my thoughts, as one concerning which there was much uncertainty, and in which it was not particularly necessary that I should perplex my mind. I now almost entirely ceased to peruse the Bible; for although its awful allegories and metaphors were no longer a terror, yet it was a dull, dismal book, from association. I scarcely thought of its richness in the tender, the beautiful, and the grand, on which I might have feasted my taste, if not my feelings of devotion. I had no inclination to return to what was, as it were, a mighty cavern, where I had felt deadly chills, and imagined fearful sights in its darkness, having no guide, no clear light, to show me the solemn splendors of a divinely built temple. This neglect of sacred things, as it happened, had no particularly bad effect upon my morals. I lived in comparative solitude and obscurity, and spent much of my time with books. I had intercourse with but few of the living, so that I remained as pure as ever in my character, from the mere absence of temptation. How often have I shuddered at what might have been my fate, with but a small difference in situation.

During these years, when I slighted religion, put away the Bible, and turned my face from eternity, how might I have been led astray and lost, amid the social excitements and seductions of a village, a college, or a city. I possessed ardent passions, spontaneous sympathy, and a bounding spirit; and with seductive companions at my side, and pleasure in near prospect, how abandoned might I have been! God be praised that at this dangerous period I was surrounded by the simple society of rural life; and that my dearest communion was with the harmless book, and the alluring scenes of nature.

After having lived in this neglect of religious things,

for a few years, my health began to decline, with that well known disorder, the dyspepsia. I had all its alternate hopes, and fears, and horrors. At first, I was in that indefinite state, when one is doubtful whether he is really sick, or only imagines himself so; whether he ought to relax from his pursuits, and take medical care, or plunge into them more deeply, and forget his fancies, and his feelings of illness. In spite of all my exertions to keep up an interest, and a vigor, in my usual avocations, many of my waking hours were spent in melancholy revery; and then my sleep at night was haunted with horrible dreams, which still more tended to weaken my strength, and sadden my spirit, for each succeeding day.

I was at length obliged to withdraw myself from dear pursuits, and to feel the certainty that I was an invalid, and the apprehension that I might never be otherwise in this world. My early religious associations were excited, as I became alarmed for my health. I felt that there still might be a reality in religion, although the subject had been so dreadful to my early mind, and so lightly esteemed for a few years past. I knew that it had given serenity to thousands, in the day of sickness, and peace, and hope, and joy, in the hour of death. I was sick, and needed consolation, and calm. I wanted religion, and I resolved to possess it. Had I now been surrounded by gloomy zealots, seizing on this peculiar season to terrify me into their doctrinal thraldom, I know not but that they might have succeeded; might have taken and bound me, in my weakness and my want. But as it happened, nothing was said to me on the subject. My friends and neighbors saw my sallow countenance, and shrunken form, and whispered to each other of consumption, and death. But a tenderness for my feelings, or an awe of

the theme, prevented their making the most distant allusion to it, in my presence, at the time.

I communed with myself alone, on solemn subjects; and these, more than anything else, now engrossed my reflections. I was at my native home, in that rural separation fiom neighboring inhabitants, which is favorable to meditation. I had but little intercourse with others, and scarcely any with books, for I found reading to be an injury; and I had nothing to do but let my thoughts flow as they would. At first, I was painfully unsettled and doubtful. I seemed as one tossed to and fro in a dusky vacuum, where I could find no firm resting-place, and was ever shrinking back from the fancied phantoms of the obscurity.

I soon however became happily clear, and calm, and assured, in my views. While thus seeking religious truth for the first time, I wandered among what I believed to be the fairest works of the Creator, the environs of my own native home. Amid these I had rambled in past years, led by that spirit of poetry and romance, which I had caught from the genius of books. Here now I contemplated, and, for the first time, enjoyed the presence of the Framer of nature, and the Father of spirits. To me, he now seemed the source of all good. Could the Being who fashioned these features of the landscape so beautifully, could he be anything but merciful and lovely? It was in the summer, and all living things around me seemed rejoicing under the mild influences of the season. God is most surely good, thought I. His tender mercies are indeed over all his works; else why is this beauty, and bounty, and manifest enjoyment? I re-opened the Scriptures. My eye now fell upon, and my soul delighted in, passages that were scarcely noticed before. My mind had been excited with gratitude to the Creator, from the

contemplation of his admirable works, and now, when I selected portions of holy writ, for my reading and meditation, I yet seemed to repose in green pastures, and to be led beside the still waters. I had such a sense of God, in the abundance of his blessings, that I scarcely thought of that terrible majesty and dominion, at which I trembled in childhood. My acquaintance with the principles of literature, enabled me to understand that those material representations were figures of language, such as were usual with poetic minds, particularly those of the earlier ages of the world. There were still, however, in the sacred record, many things which were mysterious and awful; but I supposed that, with a proper acquaintance with the circumstances under which these things were written, all would appear in delightful harmony with those evidences of love, with which all nature was full. For is not the whole material universe a revelation of the divine character, a scripture of truth, as well as the volume of the Word? And what are a few uninterpreted verses of inspiration, compared with that plenitude of proof, which all can understand, and which equally proceeded from the finger divine? Why then should not I love this loveliest of beings?

But it was not merely nature, nor the Bible alone, that I studied, to gain a knowledge of God, and attain a religious spirit. I studied my own experience. I beheld, in that series of circumstances by which my life had been influenced, a divinely-laid plan. How generously had some valuable principles of my nature been nurtured; how wisely some exuberant tendencies been restrained, How many evils had I not escaped; what good had I not received. My Father in heaven seemed ever to have been leaning watchfully over me, with tender, though chastening love.

I had been afflicted more sorely, I thought at the time, than most others of my age; but now I felt the truth of the Scripture, that affliction cometh not forth of the dust; neither doth trouble spring out of the ground. The evils of my lot seemed plainly the descending influences of Heaven, to produce in my fallow soul those fruits of the spirit, love, joy, gentleness and faith.

The gospel, whose meaning I never realized before, was most truly a gospel to me now; glad tidings, that I was the care of One, infinite in love. How rich was the language of Jesus, in consolation and encouragement! Although it was in those distant and strange ages that he spoke, yet his words came to my newly interested mind with an efficacy, as if I had caught them from his own living tongue. Did not I, as well as the immediate disciples, behold the fowls of the air, which gather not into barns, yet are fed, and the flowers of the field, which toil not, nor spin, yet are so beautiful? And was not I, the Father's immortal offspring, much better than they? Surely the hairs of my head are also numbered, and shall not fall unnoticed to the ground; and shall I be found one of the little in faith? Let me seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and the needed things of this life shall be added thereto.

But it was not to the uttered precept alone that I looked, to inspirit my soul, and light me to the kingdom. I looked unto Jesus himself. I contemplated his own perfect example. Was he not a man of suffering and sorrows? yet how perfect his resignation! His Father had appointed his difficult and painful way in the world; and did he turn aside from his course? Let me likewise pursue my appointed path with determination and trust to the end.

Besides this new piety towards God which I had acquired, I also gained clearer and more impressive view of my duty to my fellow creatures around. I had kind affections before. I was ready to do good when there was a call upon my sympathy. But I had not considered myself as connected with all that is human, by the tie of a common relationship. I had not felt that the world was one great household, wherein a sense of a common Father's love should bind all together in fraternal unity. Jesus was my instructer in this. I need not repeat his precepts, for all who will read this, have read them. They were certain lights to all my future paths, wherever they might lead me, among men. But His own personal example was a still more glorious aid. Here was the perfection of precept, illustrated by the perfection of practice. Here I had certain evidence that one, with like affections with myself, could feel a most tender interest even in his most bitter enemies. And could not I do the same? I saw the example, felt my ability — I could not mistake my duty.

In the mission, the character, and the teaching of Jesus, it scarcely entered my thoughts that there was anything mysterious and perplexing. I was by myself, free and uninfluenced by the fallible. I wanted to know my duty, to do it, and to be happy. In Jesus I beheld it plainly taught and exemplified. The great all-embracing doctrines of love to God, and love to man, I clearly understood. I felt them to be true and necessary. They possessed my whole soul, to the exclusion of all inferior considerations. These principles put in practice, must, in the eternal nature of things produce purity, and peace, and happiness in this life; they must in the eternal nature of things, prepare for happiness in the life to come. To be like Jesus, benevolent, doing good to all; to be like God

universal in love, was to partake of the perfections of the Son and the Father; it was to participate also in their holy, heavenly felicity. Religion was no dark path to me now. Why should it be dark? The light of God's goodness was reflected on it from all his creations, and his providence. Jesus, the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, went before me in the same, as a guide. I could not turn my eyes from so distinct and glorious a vision. I was surrounded with light, I followed light. It was a way of plainness, and pleasantness, and peace.

My health was still infirm, and uncertain; but I felt no anxiety. I was resigned to live, or die unto the Lord. Thy will be done. Why should I not feel and cherish, and act upon the sentiment! Was it not the will of Infinite wisdom and love?

I cannot but mention one glorious summer evening, it is so delightful a remembrance to my mind. There was a violent shower, like those which had been such a terror to me, in my childhood. Since that period I had studied and admired the divine contrivances in nature; and now I experienced the calm trust of religion. I most deeply realized the great and delightful change that had come over my mind. God seemed now to make the clouds his chariot, and to walk upon the wings of the wind; but it was to make visitings of mercy to the earth; it was that his paths might drop fatness, and the year be crowned with good. God thundered marvellously with his voice; but it was the same paternal voice, breathed so still and small in calmer nature, now raised to its mightier eloquence, to persuade of his presence and his love. 'The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.' I felt the Psalmist's sentiment to the full. If ever my soul was lifted to the sublime of devotion, it was then.

When the rain was over, I went forth, as would any lover of nature, to enjoy the most glorious of all scenes, the earth, and sky, at sunset, after a summer shower. But I now went forth as a lover of nature's God. I ascended an eminence where I had stood a thousand times, in earlier life, to let a romantic eye feast upon the rich variety of prospect. I stood and beheld now as one who lived, and moved, and had his being, not merely in this fair inanimate creation, but also in the living, adorable Creator. In the very striking scene I surveyed, he seemed to present to my view the emblems of my experience. That eastern cloud, with its departing gloom, dying thunders, and sun-gilt rear, seemed like my first dark and terrific views, which the light of reason now illustrated, and made pleasant to my contemplation, as they passed away from my mind. The thousand splendors which now shone around, were as the joyful illuminations of truth upon my mind. In my present happy frame, with a clear understanding and a glowing heart, it was delightful to trace a resemblance between the light of my soul and the resplendency of nature.

There was a divine providence in these influences of the seasons, and was there not the same tender providence in the influences of my life? 'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. For of him, and to him, and through him, are all things.' God was all in all. I seemed to repose in the cherishing bosom of the all-surrounding Divinity. If in this outward, sensual world I could so realize him, what might not be my instant blessedness, could the frame of clay but fall at once from my rapt spirit? I could not but be in heaven. I almost wished to depart. I had been so long withdrawn from worldly pursuits, that I had almost lost my interest in them; and I had so long almost exclusively contem-

plated heavenly things, here in my solitude, that heave nly places in Christ Jesus seemed more congenial to my spirit, than the earthly places from which I had for a while retired. But there was now a probability of my restoration to health, and I must then go back to the world, and its pursuits. Be it even so. I was prepared to mingle more than ever with my fellow beings; for the religion I had received, was not given from above so much for solitude, as for society, Jesus went about doing good; I would be like him. As his disciple I was ready to present my body a living sacrifice unto God, in whatever way his providence should appoint. The peace of God which passeth all understanding, seemed now to keep my mind and heart.

Let not the reader, however, suppose that this christian light and calm came with a steady and untroubled progress over my soul. From the melancholy nature of my disorder, I had many sad apprehensions and dark hours, especially at first. But these were nothing compared with my agonizing compunctions for sin. Had I not lived for years without God in the world? Although I had imbibed gloomy and repulsive notions of his character in early life, yet when these passed from my mind, there was no need of my banishing all thoughts of God. I still felt his existence and his power, but I paid my devotions to idols of my own vain desires and imaginations. I knew of the most merciful Father, yet I had sought no blessing, had poured no gratitude, had kept from him my heart; and I was now bowed with shame, agitated with remorse. Often did the throbbings, and the gushings of penitence overwhelm my soul. But I sought for forgiveness; most earnestly I sought it, in the filial, christian way. I relied upon the tender promises of which the Scripture is full. I felt that a broken heart, a contrite

spirit, and newness of life would insure me forgiveness; and at length I attained the composure, the confidence, and the joy of which I have spoken.

My health, in the autumn, began steadily to improve; and I began to think of the world and its affairs again. But I trust that my anticipations, though bright and ardent, from the nature of my temperament, were, nevertheless, chastened and led by the spirit of Christianity. My sickness had been as a solemn sanctuary, wherein I had confessed my sins, received an unction, and made a covenant with God. I was now ready for the open performance of my secret vows.

There was one imperious christian duty yet to be done. It was to acknowledge Christ before men, and partake of the memorials of his love. I saw no reasons for delay. How delightfully had my views of this act been changed, since my early life. I then looked upon it with trembling awe. I considered members newly received to the communion, as giving up their interest in this life, and henceforth devoting themselves to austerity and gloom. Next to the gates of the grave, those of the church were most dreadful of approach. I felt nothing of this chill and cheerlessness now. For what was it to sit at the rite of the supper? It was to partake of emblems, simply to remind me of Jesus. "This do in remembrance of me," were his words, and why should I not remember him? Was it not most delightful to do so? Could there be but peace and joy in recalling him to mind, who had come from the bosom of the Father, to bring peace and joy to the world? Did he not give himself for me? Did he not die that I might live? What could be darker ingratitude, than a neglect of the simple rite he instituted for his followers, just before his tortures and death for their good? Did not Jesus come, moreover, to set an example, that

man might imitate, and be happy? How important then that all means should be embraced, to recall the perfect model, that the imperfect might grow into a likeness thereto. Blessed institution, adapted to the wants of sensual, forgetful man! Happy those who make use of its aid!

Oh, it was an ever-memorable day, that solemn but cheerful Sabbath, in which I joined myself to the church of Christ in my native town. My mind could not but be thronged with thoughts; reviews of the past, high resolves for the future; all the affecting and sublime considerations of a divine religion; faith, hope, charity; man, and Christ, and God; heaven and eternity. My soul was so possessed with these great and solemn subjects, that I was scarcely conscious of what otherwise I might have shrunk from, the pursuing, fastening gaze of the whole congregation, as I moved up the central aisle, and stood before the covered table of communion, and my venerable pastor, to assent to the brief and simple form of admission to his church. His voice trembled, and his eye was moistened with unusual tenderness, as he spoke the words of reception to fellowship, and engaged to pray for, and watch over me, and asked my prayers and watching in return. I was the only young man he had thus received, for years, and it seemed as if he felt a more than pastoral, even a paternal affection for one who had alone, and unasked, entered into this new relation so interesting to his office.

As the congregation retired, leaving me for the first time in the midst of communicants, most of them much my elders, I felt a sense of solitariness in the service, which should not be in the memorial of Him who would comprehend all in the bonds of fraternal love. Had the young who had all gone away, no gratitude, no desires after wisdom and purity, and that perfection of character

which religion sets forth? But I had charity for the absent, for I well knew the reasons of their neglect, from the remembrance of my own early views.

When I met some of my youthful acquaintance afterward, on the same day, there was a strangeness in their looks towards me, as if I was not the same being as before. Was it because I was no longer among the young, and had lost all my sympathy with the age? I endeavored to manifest by a cheerful serenity and a lively interest in their society, that I had not lost the vivacity and the freshness of youth, notwithstanding I had sat down with their parents in the solemnity of the sacrament.

Soon after this I left my native home, no longer to consider it as my own proper place of abode. I exchanged its quiet seclusion for new and strange and more crowded scenes. I was now to meet the populous, trying, and tempting world. But I trust that I had an armor of God, the preparation of the gospel of peace. I had embraced what is called Liberal Christianity; and I can with truth say, that it had great influence in keeping me unspotted from the world, and steadfast amid its changes. I have since lived some years, and been in various situations. I have been disappointed in plans, have buried the beloved, have been sick and near death myself, and my religion has never failed to alleviate, cheer, and sustain. I have read and thought much, but my peculiar views have not changed, except as the dawn changes in spreading and brightening toward the perfect day.